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# Allen's and Truffaut's Incontinental Drifts

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Broadway Danny Rose



Confidentially Yours

By Dan Sallitt

The tone of the modern cinema was set by the art-house and auteurist revolutions of the fifties and sixties—every contemporary director from Kubrick to Eastwood considers himself or herself a star. The pros and cons of this ethos are as evenly balanced as those of the old Hollywood factory system: For every artist whose ambitions were stifled by old-time studio restrictions, there's a corresponding case in today's system whose incontinence would have been nicely held in check by the self-effacing standards of yesteryear.

Which brings us to Woody Allen and Francois Truffaut, two talented directors whose recent films have been blighted by nearly the same syndrome. Both are apparently so taken with their own artistry and/or personalities that the personal touches in their films leap out of context with the clatter of unsolicited autobiography. Their latest releases suffer from

this tendency to different degrees: Allen's *Broadway Danny Rose* is often lively and entertaining around the edges despite its questionable premises, whereas Truffaut's *Confidentially Yours* is so devoid of even simple virtues that it is nearly unthinkable as the work of the director of *The 400 Blows*, *Jules and Jim*, and *Day for Night*. Allen's artistic recovery would be a surprise, but Truffaut's would be a resurrection.

**W**ere I not discussing the similarities between the two films, I wouldn't be inclined to emphasize the negative aspects of *Broadway Danny Rose*. Allen's loosest film in years, *Danny Rose* benefits from the contributions of a large and eccentric supporting cast and especially from the patter of a bevy of New York comedians who spend the film sitting in a deli trading jokes and stories, one of which becomes the film's narrative.

The title character is a small-time talent agent whose stable seems to consist pri-

marily of entertainers with physical disabilities. Allen's impersonation of Rose is sporadic at best—Rose's frantic hand gestures and desperately forced familiarity yield most of the time to Allen's familiar persona, sarcastic and not even faintly pushy—but even half a performance is a generous concession from Allen. As usual, Allen conspicuously avoids giving us an adequate picture of the central character's personality in the introductory scenes: Nearly all his films are built around the audience's familiarity with the Allen persona and its confidence that this persona won't vary much from film to film.

The one client whom Rose hopes to build into a star is an aging Italian singer (Nick Apollo Forte) on the comeback road. In an attempt to keep his client happy, Rose agrees to accompany the married singer's brassy mistress Tina (Mia Farrow) to an opening engagement—a mission that gets more and more complicated, until Rose and Tina find themselves on the run from the vengeance of Tina's

Mafioso brothers. During the excitement, of course, the odd couple find time to cultivate their mutual attraction.

The movement of the film reduces an original piece of material to the familiar Allen myth—the acceptance of unrequested love. After a first half that features an unusual amount of sharp and funny social observation, the film gradually fades the Rose character out in favor of the Allen persona, which consists of equal parts comic schmuck (the Allen of the early funny films) and witty sophisticate (the Allen of the autobiography films). Allen always keeps an ironic distance from the schmuck character by means of clever dialogue and the obvious artifice of his comic line delivery; by contrast, the films do everything possible to eliminate the distance between Allen the fictional wit and Allen the real-life wit. Like so many other Allen heroines, Tina tells us that looks are less important to her than intelligence and personality (Rose has neither, but Rose has begun to recede from the

film at this point—we know whom Tina is talking about); like the others, she is eventually helpless before Allen's romantic appeal.

The film's second half is handicapped not only by this self-flattering scenario but also by the Chaplinesque self-directed pathos that Allen milks when client and lover abandon him in the penultimate reel. Ultimately, the story tells us nothing about Rose, in the sense that no aspect of Rose's character affects the outcome of the plot. The story does tell us quite a bit about Allen, but nothing that we don't know already. Under their sometimes entertaining surfaces, Allen's films have increasingly sacrificed artistic resonance for what appears to be the gratification of his vanity.

**C**onfidentially Yours has no entertaining surface to obscure the workings of Truffaut's mind. One of the alarming things about the loss of perspective that has afflicted Truffaut for the last ten years is that its manifestations are so bald: No exegesis is required for us to observe the director's idiosyncrasies laying waste to the fiction.

A tribute to the American detective thriller, *Confidentially Yours* is a vehicle for Fanny Ardant, the star of Truffaut's *The Woman Next Door* and a singularly charmless presence in his hands. Secretary to a real-estate agent (Jean-Louis Trintignant) who is charged with the murders of his wife and wife's lover, Ardant decides to play amateur detective while her boss holes up in the back room of his office. Ardant and Trintignant grow fond of each other over the course of the investigation, although from the outset their relationship is as quarrelsome and spiky as all Ardant's interactions in the film.

Unlike most of Truffaut's other work of recent years, *Confidentially Yours* is intrinsically superficial, and Truffaut doesn't try to deepen the material. Ardant trots coyly through her sleuthing without revealing a hint of fear, obsession, uncertainty, or any other relevant emotion. Genre conventions cover a multitude of sins: Characters violate even the simplest rules of behavioral plausibility

just to help Truffaut stage a familiar detective-movie scene, and the need for continuous action overrides character motivation at every point.

On top of these penny ante vices, which every bad director is capable of, Truffaut superposes his own painfully personal misjudgments. One of the founding fathers of auteurism, Truffaut has gradually forgotten over the years that the artist's personality is intrusive when not expressed through the form of the film. The little incidental anomalies that used to flash through his early films have become Truffaut's only interest, and the weight that he gives them is both artistically destructive and a sign of his self-congratulatory personality. No clever character touch is so minor that Truffaut will not devote several lines of dialogue to underlining it; no digression is too insignificant for him to film it as if it were a climax. Bits of dialogue expressing Truffaut's own feelings about life are placed in the mouths of the most inappropriate characters—Trintignant, having just attacked his wife, calms himself by repeating Truffaut's standard interview line about his lack of temper—and inappropriate philosophical comments are embedded in the film like tumors—Trintignant interrupts the frivolity to remind us solemnly that three characters (including his wife) have truly died, then proceeds to work on his light-hearted affair with Ardant. In keeping with this pattern of free-floating self-expression, Truffaut's favorite sexual images proliferate in *Confidentially Yours*, and the film looks at times like lightweight pornography for leg watchers.

**T**ruffaut's self-satisfaction can be mistaken for incompetence. A too-foregrounded digression looks like a false story lead; phony dialogue from a mysterious character looks like a muffled attempt at ambiguity. In other words, Truffaut's vices destroy everything around them. When he used to indulge them in moderation in the late seventies, his films looked interesting but uneven; now that he indulges them exclusively, his films look altogether uninteresting. Has any other great director ever declined so precipitously? ❧